

REUNION
SIXTEEN
JUNE OF THE YEAR
and
THE STAKES

Four Short Stories By
Winifred Ann Rodgers

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REUNION

The deviled eggs, covered with a napkin, were on a corner of the table; and the beaten biscuits were stacked in a neat pile in a box. Everything had been done, it seemed. Annie inspected the kitchen carefully, the full wood-box, the clean bread board, the shelves covered with fresh paper. They would be eating in the yard, but Emily might bring little Emily in for a drink of water; and she wanted everything to be like a pin.

"This is silly," she scolded herself. "Forty years, and I'm behaving like I've just married into the family." It had always been that way when they came, and they were conscious of it as much as she. As soon as one of them set foot in her hall, an odd sort of pride took hold of her; and hard as she tried to conceal it, it showed in everything she said or did.

She leaned over heavily and reached for the copper kettle in the cupboard. With her apron she rubbed a spot from its side and then placed it on the range where it caught a glint from the morning sun shining in the square window beside the stove. Richard's mother had given them the kettle when they were first married, and she had always liked it. Besides, they would notice. They would say, "Did you see? She had out the copper kettle Mama gave them." Annie saw how their eyes looked for things. Janie's picture with the pince-nez and the big nose had bothered her when she first lived there, and she had taken it down; but when Emily came to visit, she had talked about Janie—"not beautiful, but glowing with an inner light"—and had let her eyes wander over the wall as if she were looking for something.

Next day Annie had put the picture back. After all, it was a small thing to do to please the family.

Richard never said anything about things like that. He had plainly told her that she could do what she wanted to to the house, but she had let it stay the way it was. She felt at home enough in it. It was only when the rest of the family came that she felt uncomfortable there--just when she wanted most to feel right. Today would be different, she hoped. They hadn't been there in a long time, not since Richard, Junior, had been killed, and they had all come for the memorial service. That day they had brought food and taken over in the kitchen, and for once she hadn't minded feeling like a stranger. She watched them with their quick movements and their uneasy smiles, and they hadn't mattered. Even Richard hadn't mattered then. It was a strange way for her to feel, almost as if she were watching herself in her own pain and silence. Richard had talked about his grief and turned to them, and she had let him. She wasn't jealous of him then, not even when Sarah was around.

Sarah. She sighed. Her starched skirts rustled as she moved across the worn floor of the kitchen and sat down on the wood box. She tucked a stray hair into the bun at the back of her neck and looked out over the yard, past the chicken houses and the barn, to the fields beyond, the land which she had been so proud to become a part of when she had married Richard. "Sarah was between us even then," she thought. Not that they saw her much. Sometimes she didn't come near the house for a whole winter. It was the summers Annie dreaded because it always happened that she and Richard met Sarah, and usually quite by accident. They would visit the same afternoon

at Emily's house outside of Anson Court House, or they would see each other after services in old Fulton Church; or, like today, they would be together at family reunions because Sarah and Richard were third cousins. ("Second cousins once removed," Annie's daughter-in-law would say emphatically, trying to get the family relations straight in her mind.) If Sarah had only planned those meetings she would have been able to get mad, but it was always quite by accident; and she would see their faces light up with surprise and happiness. They spoke of each other in the fondest way, and never attempted to hide their feelings. It had almost driven her crazy when she had first married Richard, this delight of theirs in each other's company. That was when Sarah was still single. After she had married Annie had breathed a sigh of relief, but Sarah was left a widow five years later--and a very pretty widow, Annie had to admit, although she always had considered Sarah's nose a little thin. Once she had foolishly tried to blame Sarah for something, but Richard had looked at her so sternly and told her so firmly that she was wrong that she had been afraid to say anything else about it. (What was it about? She couldn't even remember now. She had known it was untrue at the time.)

Hush! There was a car coming. She got up quickly from the wood box and gave the kitchen one last hurried inspection. Through the entry door she saw two cars coming into the yard. Richard was smiling and waving and directing them where to park. He had been up since five--so excited--just like a little boy. She watched him walking between the rows of boxwoods to the car--tall, stooped, with fine grey hair, and with a proud, intelligent look. That was what had made her watch him so much at that first house party when he was walking

with Sarah--that proud look, and she had resolved then that she would have him. She had even been foolish enough to confess to Emily that Richard was the man she wanted. Emily had just laughed and said, "Sorry, but he's taken. Can't you see the way he looks at Cousin Sarah?" Sometimes she wished she had listened to Emily; but she wanted him so, and he needed her. She watched him help Sarah from the car, placing her shawl back on her shoulders when it slipped off. "I have made him happy," she whispered to herself. "I've been his strength, the strength he lacked."

As she started out the door, two more cars drove into the yard. Everyone was kissing everyone else and laughing when she came up. Emily's husband, John, pretended to get mixed up and went around twice and then laughed about getting two kisses from Annie's pretty, new daughter-in-law, who was so confused about all the relatives that she didn't know whom she had kissed. Finally they were all sitting down under the big elm. Richard had brought some straight chairs from the parlor because there weren't enough rockers, and Emily's two grandsons sat in them, straight and stiff, not knowing what to do with their big red hands. Annie had brought out some old china dolls for Sarah's grandchildren, but the little girls left them face downwards on the lawn and went off to climb the holly. The older people were all talking about the place and how well it was kept up.

"You'd never know this place had been here a hundred years without any repairs to speak of," Emily said. They all turned and studied the house. No one said anything for several minutes. Finally, John cleared his throat and commented loudly, "Remarkable how it's preserved," and it sounded so strange and forced in the quiet that no one

knew what to say. Richard scraped his chair around and got comfortable. In the silence they heard the little girls screaming to each other from the branches of the holly tree. "Why, we ought not to eat for a half hour," Annie thought impatiently, "and they've already stopped talking like the're waiting for something." Just because this was the first time they had let her have the reunion, they weren't going to ruin it.

"It looks as new as it did the night Richard and I were married, and we had the reception on the lawn, doesn't it?" There. She had said it, and they hadn't thought she would. It was silly. She had been married to him forty years, and she hadn't been able to talk about those happy times to any of them. It was cruel what they had done to her. They had no right to make her keep it locked within herself all these years. Now they were all looking at Cousin Sarah almost involuntarily, but Sarah didn't seem to notice.

"That was a lovely night," Sarah said. "I remember Aunt Susie had strung Chinese lanterns all across from the porch to the elm here. And how we danced that night. I'll never forget it." They all started talking about it then. The ones who hadn't been there listened. The children knew stories like these so well that they listened, feeling ~~like~~ ^{as if} they had been there. Annie leaned back with a sigh. Sarah hadn't minded. She had almost seemed glad. Why, they had said--she had heard some of them talking in the kitchen one day--they had said that Sarah had refused to dance with anyone that night and had gone into the garden and cried and cried, and she wouldn't have come back except to keep Annie from feeling bad. How perfectly silly!

They were all talking now, even Emily's shy grandsons with the red hands. She got up to slip off and see about everything. "Can't I help

you?" Emily whispered. "We brought a few things. They're in the back of the car." Why wouldn't they ever let her do it by herself? They always had to help, and she didn't want them to. She had told them not to bring anything. "You shouldn't have done that," she scolded, trying not to sound as put out as she really was.

Dinner went off fine. They finished up with pecan pies and three kinds of cake, the boys stuffing a little of each because they couldn't decide which. They talked for awhile about the children and what they were doing in school, and John bragged about John, Junior, being first-honor graduate from high school; but soon they were talking again about the old days.

Richard smiled broadly and said, "When was it that John fell. . . ." he laughed outright with cake crumbs all over his mouth. . . "John fell. . . he, he, he. . . fell. . . he, he. . . fell in the pig pen?" They were all laughing before he finished because they knew the story well, and it never failed to amuse them and set off a chain of reminiscences. John pretended to be offended and said that he still believed that Richard had pushed him. He had been accusing him of that for forty years now, and they never got tired of it. Annie said before she thought (later she wondered why she said it, but she supposed she did because it was there in her heart), "That was the house party when I met Richard." And they stopped laughing. They all remembered.

"So it was," John said and started talking about something else. They all remembered. It took so little to remind them. Didn't they know that she knew she had done wrong and was tired of suffering for it? The thing she had told Richard had been so little at the time. How could it have blown up in importance like this? Besides, it was

really true. Sarah did have a touch of consumption. At least, the doctor had warned her to be careful. Richard had been young and strong and Annie didn't want him to marry an invalid. It all seemed foolish now. Sarah had lived a long life, and a healthy one, but how could she have known. "Richard's weak," she thought, "but they don't blame him. He was afraid to marry Sarah when I told him, but he soon saw how foolish he had been. He didn't have to marry me."

Emily was telling her something about little Emily's report card, and she listened and felt drawn back into the group. They weren't still thinking about it. Only she. Maybe it had always been that way. They didn't think of it. Just she.

Richard was in a cane bottomed chair leaning back against a tree with his old eyes blinking slowly. Sarah was lying on the cot they had brought out for her, with her shawl around her feet, telling him about some cousin's wedding. She looked at them and wanted to feel something. Did their eyes meet? She watched to see. Richard, with his eyes closed, chewed on a stick; and Sarah coughed a little, drew the shawl over her knees, and went on talking. She said something funny, and they both laughed. Annie had heard, even before she met Sarah, "Cousin Sarah has a sharp wit." Now Richard looked at Sarah tenderly and smiled. Annie watched them and without knowing why, suddenly, she smiled a little too. Slowly the old, old feeling of bitterness went away, and left her heart dry and dusty. Filling the emptiness, there came to her a feeling of immense sadness. She didn't really care if they laughed together. They no longer cared either, for neither one glanced over at her as they used to when they talked and laughed together. She wished that it mattered. She even wished that the old, throbbing flow of jealousy would come over

her as it had so many times before, but it didn't. Now they weren't even talking to each other but were listening to what John was saying about hybrid corn. They didn't care about her, about each other. The tears started to her eyes. "Are we all so old," she thought, "so very old?"

SIXTEEN

Tonight I am crying the tears of sixteen--happiness and sadness stirred together--and thinking the thoughts of sixteen. The tree outside my open window is dark against the sky. The wind stirs the tree, and its branches rock. I am with the branches, for I am there as high as they and so sleepy and happy and wanting to stay awake, yet dropping off to sleep. I say a sentence slowly, and the words sound impressive together. Oh, to remember that sentence till morning. It's so clear and logical and deep, and yet high as the tree outside the window, and I am swaying with the tree.

* * *

She met him the winter she was sixteen. She was a senior in high school and felt very young and very old at the same time. He was "on leave" from military school and wearing his uniform which he wore now with pride; but which, on "leaves" in the future, he would discard with an uncertain feeling of embarrassment at wearing it when other fellows were wearing khaki and military school was considered "kid stuff." He didn't feel that way now, and wore it with assurance, almost cockiness. The other boys stood around the juke box and made fun of how straight he had to stand in the uniform, and one said something about corsets and laughed; but there was a tinge of admiration in the tone of their teasing. The girls thought he was wonderful; and, though they refused to say it with their lips, they all said it with their eyes. And she knew that he knew about girls' eyes from all his eighteen years of experience.

He was very experienced. "Smooth" her sister in college had called that quality in one of the State boys she knew, but somehow she didn't like the word. It was so unpleasant sounding, and he was not unpleasant at all. He just had a way of making you feel so at ease and sophisticated that the girls all loved. From the first she had felt at ease with him. Some one had played "I Don't Want to Set the World on Fire," and the gaudy red and yellow lights of the juke box lit up the plank walls of the store. She was listening and not listening to James Oliver tell about his courses in agriculture at State, and then she looked up; and he was there asking her to dance. She was surprised that he came to dance with her. He didn't know her then because she was from the upper end of the county, but she had seen him at dances before. He usually broke on most of the girls at the dances and only settled down to dancing with one after ten o'clock. Usually it was Myrtle Waters he danced with after ten. Myrtle didn't have much background. Her mother always said, "If that Myrtle Waters is anything it isn't because of her mother." The other girls said Myrtle was a little "fast," but that was only when she was dancing with their fellows or something. She was really not bad; she played the organ every Sunday at church.

Myrtle always had a "steady," and that meant that she was admired by all the boys and envied by all the girls. Girls with "steadies" and just plain girls were two different classes in high school. The girls with steadies could dance with all the boys and laugh and talk easily with them because they were "buddies." She had heard Myrtle Waters say so many times about Red Parker, "Red is m'buddy," and then she would wink at him and laugh and he would put

his arm around her shoulders and squeeze her. Having a "steady" didn't matter much till after ten. That was when the boys and girls paired off. The girls who were left sat on the benches at the side and talked and giggled and every now and then walked self-consciously across the floor to the rest room to comb their hair.

The waiting might be all right for Mary Anne Draper and some of them, but she hated it. It was a relief to see the car coming with her Father to take her home. On these trips home she was thankful more than ever for her father. He would say, "Did you have a good time, chicken?" and she would say, "Wonderful!" and then they wouldn't talk--just the purring of the motor in the silence. He never asked like Mother, "How many boys did you dance with, sugar?" Did Billy Hollis dance with you? His father owes so much to your father." She and her father would ride along in the crisp coolness of the night with the wind that came through the tiny crack in the windshield blowing her hair, and the heater warming her feet. There was something almost magical about the world as it looked at this unnaturally late hour of twelve when all the people in the county were asleep. The car would go on for miles, and she would wish never to get home, for the car had turned into a boat which took the small waves smoothly, easily, and she was asleep.

* * *

The tears of sixteen. I was thinking about the tears of sixteen.
About their sadness. Yes, a certain amount of sadness, I suppose,
but mixed with the knowledge that next time will be different; the
moon will shine, and your prince will come.

Her Prince had come that winter. From the time he came and danced with her, everything had been perfect.

"Hello," he said.

"Hello."

"I don't suppose you know me, but I've seen you."

"You have? Where?" she questioned.

"At the big dances at Grimes Junction. I've seen you there several times."

"You have? I've seen you someplace, but I don't know where."

She knew that she had sat on the side at the dances and watched him, and watched him all the time she was stumbling around the floor with Pete Millikin. Nobody much broke on her when she danced with Pete Millikin because they thought all she could do was his uncertain boxy step that bobbed around the floor evading elbows.

"I've seen you somewhere," she said. "What's your name?" She knew his name too, Jim Owen, Cadet James R. Owen. She had found that out before.

"Jim Owen," he answered. "And yours, Mademoiselle?"

"Elizabeth," she answered. "Elizabeth Monroe."

"Glad to know you. . ." he thought a minute ". . . Becky." And he stopped dancing and made a little bow.

She couldn't help it. She giggled with pleasure.

After that they danced without talking. The minutes got longer and longer, and she couldn't think of what would be right to say to him. She made up little speeches: "How's school? You do go to Hilton, don't you?" No, not talk about school. Maybe she could say something about the record they were playing. She had just decided

what to say. "Some band, isn't it?" she was going to say, and she drew her head back a little to say it when he said, "I don't know why I waited so long to dance with you." Just like that! Just like boys talked to Myrtle Waters. Just like the things Bill Marlowe said to Dawn Reece in the story "To Love Again" that she read in the Herald Informer when no one was around.

They danced for a long time; and when someone broke, he looked disappointed. But he came back, and they talked about his school, and he told her all about the white glove inspection and the rats, and best of all, he smoked. She had never gone with a boy who smoked. The evening had been much too short. When Father had come, she kept him waiting fifteen whole minutes while she danced some more. When she went out to the car, she wanted to tell him about the dance, but all he said was, "Did you have a good time, chicken?" and she said like always, "Wonderful!" But on the way home she thought about the evening from start to finish, and the ride had been more magical than ever before.

That winter had passed fast. He had written to her; and when graduation time came, he was there to take her to the party afterwards. She liked the way he was kind to her, not considering her proper, but just nice. Maybe they were both just a little proper. She had wanted him to kiss her that night, but he didn't. He didn't kiss her for a long time, not until the night of his birthday when she gave him the tie pin. He just leaned over and gave her a light little kiss, and then he kissed her again in a way that surprised her so that she backed off and almost knocked over his mother's best lamp—the one with the Godey's prints on the shade. When she saw

what she had done, she blushed. He laughed at her for blushing, but he kissed her on each bright cheek, and then again on the lips, and it didn't matter that she had blushed.

That summer had been the best she could remember--hamburgers at the Curve Inn and dancing at the store and even a week-end at the beach, which Mother finally consented to. Those good times you couldn't forget; and the next spring at school as soon as there was a touch of warm weather, she found herself thinking of them all the time. But that summer wasn't like the others, nor the next three years. He left State where he was studying then, and went into the infantry. She prayed for him, and thought maybe they had been too frivolous, never serious enough, as if their frivolity might be the cause of his death.

She thought very often about how she would feel if he should be killed, the things she would remember about him. At times she was sure that he wouldn't come back. She never told anyone of this feeling except her mother who had only made her rest and start back on her vitamin pills. "She would feel better tomorrow. Better about everything." But she had been convinced that he would be killed, and she only waited for the telegram to come. One day it did come, but it said that he was coming home, that he loved her, and that he wanted to marry her. Did she want him to die? she asked herself. Everything they had had together had been so perfect. But she knew she didn't. There was a throbbing in her that wouldn't be quieted.

He came back, and they had started dating again, just as frivolous as ever; and for a little while it was like old times. He

drew the old crowd back together, and they were all gay--very gay. Myrtle Waters got drunk every night and told them about her soldier husband she had divorced--"The cutest little lieutenant with a mustache right there;" and she would kiss Charlie Hollis' upper lip and laugh. Charlie didn't say much until he had been drinking about an hour. Then the pain in his right arm that had been shot up would stop, and he would want everybody to sing--"sing some of the good, old songs." They would all sing with him, the old songs. Finally, he would sing "Lily Marlene" and cry. A buddy of his had liked it. "A fine lad," Charlie would say. "A fine lad."

It all made her sick. It made her deathly sick, and she tried to tell Jim about it; but he had said, "You don't know how long I've been waiting to get back to all this."

There was a difference. He was the same, but she wasn't. She wouldn't admit it to herself until she saw that the change was worrying him, and then she thought about it often. There had been a war between, and she and Jim had lost their first, new love. She supposed too that she had passed him. It was strange that she should have gone beyond him with one part of her nature and, yet, left part of herself with him. The unrest between them was something neither one understood very well. Sometimes they would talk for hours about it and get nowhere. It hadn't been hard to tell him when the time came, though. They were so much a part of each other that he understood even before she spoke. He even laughed a little and tried to make her feel better.

"It's all because you studied Plato and I studied Poultry. I haven't got a chance."

That night there seemed to be a special oneness about them. Instead of going to the party, they sat on Brandt's Hill and looked down at the town. You could hear the whip-o-wills. At school in town there were no night noises except the street car horns. But here on the hill you heard the crickets and the whip-o-wills. If she were on the hill alone the whip-o-wills would give her a lonesome, lost feeling, but with him she never felt lonesome or lost.

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Whip-o-will, whip-o-will, whip-o-will. I can hear them now from the window. The most lonesome sound there is. The year I was twenty-three I used to hear them every night and cry myself to sleep.

* * *

He married Janie Elton that year. She told herself she didn't care, and she didn't; but there were days that were long, and the whip-o-wills at night. She kept remembering things he had said. "No matter how long I live I'll remember the way your hair curls back from your forehead there," and he had touched her forehead lightly. "You are something very precious to me." She remembered the way he held his cigarette far up between his fingers in a strange, masculine way; and the way his eyes were blue--not that clear, weak blue, but blue with tiny brown specks that made them alive and strong.

It was lonesome on the farm the years after he was married, but she usually came back in the fall. There was something always compelling her to come home then. She felt tired and rather old, and each summer's memories faded as fast as the summer's tan.

But there were memories deeper and stronger that drew her home. Her mother always loved to see her. There was the balm of good food and late sleep and the air sharp so that it woke you up, but the woods peaceful. It was good to have someone to tell you when to go to bed (for her mother never would stop that), and someone to worry about your not eating, and someone who suggested things for you to do as if you were a child. Oh, it was just good to be home. But she had never longed to go home in the spring. She had never felt like this in the spring.

Yesterday, coming home on the train, she had felt very tired, very tired and very old. And she had a sort of terror at this feeling. Right then she had decided to write a letter, to quit her job. Then she had come home and put on her jeans and an old shirt and walked in the woods, not thinking much at first, and then planning what to do next--exciting plans like the "when-I-grow-up" plans she used to make. She sat down on the moss at the little fort they had built years ago when she and her sister had played Indians and settlers here. She sat and listened to the sound of the leaves making the tiniest rustling noises. The sun was warm. It seemed to shine through her jeans and shirt and touch her skin lightly, so warm and soothing.

* * *

There was something we lost together. But did we really lose?
People who look at life as he and I don't lose the things that are
past. The past is the present, and the present, the future, and
you can't break one part loose from the other. The tears of sixteen,

I said. Not much different from the tears of thirty. The wind is
blowing up a storm. I'll leave the window open. There is a strange,
free feeling about the wind tonight.

JUNE OF THE YEAR

You start looking for the big oak as soon as you pass Jubilee Baptist Church. You can find it easily. It stands out, bare and black in the cluster of trees at the edge of the field, the only one without leaves in midsummer. Dead now for years, the oak marks the edge of the property. After it there are other landmarks to count off. Nancy supposed she had done it a hundred times. There was the barn yet, then the fork, a left turn at the fork, a curve, and there would be the house in the distance.

She knew that her mother had been silently counting off the landmarks, too, and Patsy in the back seat impatiently tapped her foot against the floor. Nancy knew this silence, Patsy's own special kind of silence. She knew also how it could burst suddenly with hundreds of teasing questions like little gnats that come at dusk.

"Will you show me. . . ." Patsy's voice came in short, breathy rushes. ". . . show me the closet where the soldier hid from the Yankees?" She leaned over so far that her mother had to hold her to keep her from falling into the front seat when they hit a rut in the road. "Will you?"

Nancy nodded. This satisfied Patsy, and she settled back into the seat; but in a minute her high little voice was at Nancy's ear again. "Nan, was that First World War or Second?"

"That was the War Between the States," her mother explained before Nancy had a chance to answer. "She gave the thing a name and put it in its place," Nancy thought, and she knew her mother was satisfied. In the mirror Nancy saw Patsy thinking over the answer to her question. Then she began a tuneless, little chant,

kicking the back of the seat in rhythm and saying over and over to herself,

"First World War and Second World War.

World War One, World War Two."

Her mother began speaking, her voice complaining, its level of sound now above, now below Patsy's soft tune. "The child can't live much longer. . . our duty to come. . . tenant families with not the first idea. . ."

"The house," Nancy interrupted. "There's the house."

Standing on a slight rise, obscured at first by the trees, it slowly revealed itself as they came round the curve. It was the kind of old house found only on lonely roads of Virginia--sprawling, rectangular, with two wings, and greyed with the weather. The path to it was flanked by a double row of ancient boxwoods, originally cut and shaped, but now branching crazily every way. The yard itself was large, with towering oaks and elms and remnants of other trees destroyed by the summer's lightning of many years. Bricks that had fallen from the underpinning of the house littered the yard; and part of the roof, patched with tin, had been ripped by a severe storm and remained swinging in the slight breeze.

Nancy's mother studied the house for several minutes, her round, blue eyes blinking rapidly. She always inspected it like this when she came back, knowing it wouldn't be the same, but hoping it hadn't changed much. Then she put her hand to her throat where her dress came to a V. It was an habitual gesture with her, one that she considered very feminine and dramatic, Nancy supposed. Never could Nancy remember the condition of the

house or the tenants pleasing her mother.

She stopped the Buick under an old oak so that it would be cool when they returned. A grey hen scratched in the yard beside an old scooter wheel, and over by the steps she noticed a roll of rusty fence wire. A small boy in faded army pants rolled up to fit him came out to meet them. He shooed the hen away noisily trying to make up in this way, Nancy supposed, for the words he didn't know how to say to the visitors. Finally he managed a "How de do, Miz Boyd," but that was all. Her mother asked if Mrs. Simms were in. He said yes she was, hung his head, and started walking toward the house, looking back, inviting them to follow as a pet dog would. They walked up the steps that they knew so well and through the front door which stuck a little, just as it always had.

Mrs. Simms was standing in the center of the room looking toward the door, her eyes sharp but uninteresting. Her hair was thinner than before, Nancy noticed, and her scalp showed through, pink like a birthmark. "How de ye do, ma'm," she said. "Didn' look for no compny." She took a pile of old magazines out of a chair and offered it to Nancy's mother. "Don't guess I'd a had time to clean up nohow since the girl's been so sick. I do lak for your homeplace to look nice when you come," and she smiled. "I'd like to keep it so's you could see it lak you remember it from a child." Nancy thought how Mrs. Simms wasn't pleasantly shy as country women should be. She looked away from Mrs. Simms and stared at the wall. A placard was hanging there:

CHRIST IS COMING

all in red and blue.

Mrs. Simms kept on talking. She was glad they came out to see her girl before she passed on. (She didn't pause here, Nancy noticed.) Or did they come to see the house? she added. She hoped they hadn't, for, with her husband so busy in the fields, they had to let the house go. With a house as old as this, you couldn't do much, though. She always told him (She never called her husband by his name, but always just him) that someday they'd be burned up in this old place. He didn't much want to die in Virginia. She didn't either. She'd sooner go back to Tennessee to do her dying. With Lily, her daughter, it was different. They'd been on the move so long now she didn't hardly like one place better'n another. She'd told her the other day, "Ma, if you'd let up those two big windows and let the cool breeze through, I believe I'd die for you this afternoon."

"You should of heard her say that--just as easy. But she ain't dead yet," Mrs. Simms announced. "It won't be long. Would you like to see her, Mrs. Boyd--and the little girls. My, ain't that one growed! Is she your biggest one?" Mrs. Boyd told Mrs. Simms that she would like to see Lily. She had brought her some things. They were in the car, and if the little boy would run out and get them...The girls would like to wander over the house. Patsy never had seen much of it.

Over against the wall, where Nancy had not seen them at first, stood all the Simms children, Charles, Jim, Joe, and little Mary. They stared at her, their mouths open like little goldfish, as if to take in, in that manner, the whole experience of having visitors. She glanced away from them and over to the bookcases, beside the

fireplace, that once had overflowed with books. Her mother had taken them out and packed them away before they left for town. Through the glass she saw a box of baking soda and a jar of peanut butter on the shelf. A table with faded red oilcloth on it stood in one corner of the room, and another corner was piled high with old boxes and scraps of bedclothes. Several leaves of burley tobacco were trailed out across the floor. The Simms had the use of the whole house, but they preferred to use only three rooms.

With a jolt Nancy realized that in the place where Grandma and Grandpa Boyd used to hang were some strange pictures in the same kind of oval frames. Grandma and Grandpa's pictures had been larger, and these pictures were surrounded by a lighter patch on the wall which they didn't quite cover. These two people were dressed in the same kind of clothes that Grandma and Grandpa had worn, but they looked uncomfortable in them. The woman's features were broad, her hair thick looking. The man's face was weak and ugly. These must be the Simms's ancestors. She never thought of people like the Simms having ancestors.

Her mother and Mrs. Simms took the boxes they had brought and went into the sick girl's room. She and Patsy hesitated a minute in the front room; and then, followed by the eight eyes of the Simms children, who were still backed up against the wall, they marched up the narrow stairway that led to the upper story.

The upstairs windows were shut down tightly, and the air was breathless. They went through the rooms, and Nancy told Patsy all the stories that she had heard a thousand times when she had stayed here as a child. In one of the rooms someone had written on the

wall

CLAUDE/ LILY

TRUE LOVE

She hoped her mother wouldn't see it.

They finally deserted the upper story for the attic, reached by old ladder-like steps which she remembered as being hard for her to climb when she was small. She turned around to help Patsy, but she had already crawled up, kicking her feet and pulling herself up on her stomach. The attic was even more stifling than the second story. There were only two rooms here, in the middle gable, the highest of the house. The rooms were small and square with a door between that slanted at the top with the eaves.

They opened the minute windows beside the chimney and a cool breeze, the same that stirred the highest oaks in the yard, blew through the low-ceilinged room. Nancy sat down in an old cane-bottomed chair, and Patsy sat on the edge of an antique wooden crib beside her. Patsy found an album and began turning through it. Did any other family keep an album like this? Nancy wondered. A picture of great grandmother who died at least fifty years ago, and beside it a picture of Ann, her baby cousin. "Like pressed roses **and fresh roses** side by side," she thought. Patsy let the pages fall through her hands, and the musty smell of the album came her way in little puffs. Patsy, laughing, lifted it to her to show her a funny hat Grandma had on. Some loose pictures fell from the back and scattered on the floor. A tintype of Grandma when she was five and another faded brown print of two great aunts with their arms about each other, and there, a picture of Dave. He had on his first

real man's hat, and it came down over his ears a little. She remembered so well the time when he got it. It had been Easter, and he had worn it to church and seemed so grown-up, beyond her so far that she could never catch up. She remembered figuring it up. When she was two, he was four; when she was seven, he was nine; when she would be eighteen, he would be twenty; even when she was forty, he would be forty-two. Never catch up. But now she had caught up and passed him.

Patsy touched the picture and said, "It's Dave, ain't it, Nan?"

"Yes, it's Dave."

She stroked the picture softly with her plump little fingers. After a minute she asked, "Was Dave in First World War?"

"No. Second," Nancy answered. "The last war." Dave's picture shouldn't be here. She took it up, away from the others. Dave wasn't part of the past. Everything else up here might be, but Dave wasn't. Even Patsy remembered so little about him. When she talked about him, she made him sound as ancient as one of those dashing captains of the Civil War. Dave's uniform was wonderful, and in her mind it made him seem even older. First it had been knickers, then long pants, then a man's hat, and after that, a uniform. But that was before she saw so many--navy and khaki and white, everywhere and endlessly, navy and khaki and white. Dave had to fight that dreadful winter, and she remembered how he had signed his letters scrawled in his little boy handwriting

Your soldier son,

Dave

"V-mail is funny," she thought, "undersized and impersonal, but you can even see the original tears."

Letters from a box were spilled onto the floor beside them, and they gathered them up and read some of them. Two were from Great Aunt Jenny to her betrothed. How formal they all sounded! But Great Aunt Jenny hadn't been formal. She was the one who had written,

An ode to a toad that sat by the road

Oh toad, how thou hast growed.

What a blessing Great Grandma never realized that she caused the death of her own lovely daughter. She took an old tubercular woman in her house and fed and clothed her and sent Aunt Jenny up to sit by her bed and entertain her. They didn't know anything about germs in those days; and when Aunt Jenny died, they never even connected the two deaths. She was eighteen then, and on her tombstone they had inscribed:

LIKE A LILY BROKEN IN THE MORNING

SHE WITHERED BEFORE HER TIME

A beautiful, lively girl, they said, with brown braids and a quick wit. Nancy told Patsy the toad poem, and she laughed and said it over several times. Patsy liked to say poems, and sometimes she would repeat a silly two-line verse all day long. Nancy wondered what Great Aunt Jenny would think if she knew she was remembered by those two simple lines. "Yet," she thought, "what a nice thing to remember. From that you knew that Jenny had been young and full of fun." Before they left she took Dave's picture, hesitated a minute, and then slipped it back into the album.

They started back down the stairs. The high white walls and the funny, square, old stairway with a door at the landing, half-way down. She thought how she loved the house. So many people had been born and had died here that it all seemed right. Maybe just living here would teach you about death--death and birth and the lovely spell of living that comes between. Uprooted Lillian and Dave in Germany. At least Aunt Jenny had died in her own house.

Downstairs, she went in to see Lillian. Her mother and Mrs. Simms were talking to each other, and Lillian was lying there, so still that it seemed to Nancy that she was already dead, and that her mother and Mrs. Simms, unknowing, had continued their endless mumblings. If she should tell them, how they would scream and throw up their hands. Lillian turned to Nancy. She had short, blond hair, thin like her mother's, and she had a way of tossing it back luxuriously, dreaming, Nancy supposed, it was a chestnut mane. This habit she kept up, even in bed, spreading her hair around her head as if it could cover the pillow. Nancy began telling her some silly little story, but Lillian looked so steadily at her lips that she forgot what she was saying, and right in the middle, her voice trailed off.

Suddenly, the words on the wall upstairs came into her mind.

CLAUDE/LILY

TRUE LOVE

Last summer when she had come out, she and Lillian had gone down to the orchard for some apples. The air had been heady with the smell of summer apples and sweet betsy. It had seemed right when Lillian had started telling about herself and Claude Miller.

But later, when the words came, harsher, uglier, she had wanted to put out her hand to Lillian, to say please stop. Lillian's pale, blue eyes had not flickered; and when she had finished, she tossed her short hair back defiantly. Lillian and summer. Lillian and the sweet betsy.

Nancy's mother rose to leave. Mrs. Simms was whispering audibly to her about a dream of Lillian's, about death. Nancy turned to Lillian to say something, but couldn't think of anything.

"Well, luck's in the Lord's hands," Mrs. Simms said. "Conduct's in man's." And her mother agreeing.

Nancy broke in, talking too loud and being too gay. "I have a bed jacket, Lillian, a lovely blue satin bed jacket that I don't need." She stopped and swallowed. "It has ribbon ties and lace. Maybe you could use it while you're sick." She paused. "In case Claude comes."

Lillian shook her head.

"You'd like it. You could send it back. . . ." She looked into Lillian's blue eyes for a minute ". . . when you get well."

"All right," Lillian said and smiled, and for a second Nancy thought of Lillian and summer. The smile went away. "She was only humoring me," Nancy thought as they left.

The late afternoon sun was shining on the dry, red soil almost as relentlessly at four o'clock as it had at noon. In the small fields they passed the scorched corn leaves curled, and the occasional lone worker plowing with his single mule moved slowly, as if drugged by the heat. Nothing broke the afternoon stillness except

the steady hum of the motor and, now and then, harsh, broken bits of a jay's song.

She pushed her foot down hard on the accelerator, and the car sped along, sending out trails of dust behind it onto the tall, dry weeds beside the dirt road. She loved the feel of the wind in her face, and the feel of the power under her hands. They passed old Jubilee Church and she remembered a stone she and Dave had found there once. There had been an argument.

DEAR JOE HAS GONE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

was the inscription. Not forgotten what? Each of them had tried to outdo the other in suggesting what it was Joe had not forgotten, and they had laughed half the afternoon about it. Poor Joe, brooding and cursing over some ill the world had done him. What kind of person, Dear Joe? And not forgotten. Not forgotten what? The rain on his tin roof, and his girl's lips when he kissed her. Dear Joe. Dave had said, "Not a man to hold a grudge, but one who loved living." Of course, the inscription on his stone had been a mistake. Yet, there was dear Joe. In her mind she could almost see him, sitting on his monument, gazing out over the country round, and cursing time for cheating him.

THE STAKES

Grandpa was cutting down weeds in the front yard with a scythe when Mother and I got out there. Old Mrs. Sisk was standing in the door yelling at him. He'd better mind out. Actin' like a stubborn old man. There'd come a time when he'd be sorry. He was stubborn! After begging him a long time, Mother got him to stop; but he would not go in and lie down. He died there an hour later, sitting up in a porch chair. I don't think he knew he was going to die. Wouldn't have said what he did if he had known. Mrs. Sisk had gone back in the house, mumbling to herself, "Been given in to all his life.

"That's the trouble; and he said as loud as he could so she would be sure to hear him, "Tell the old bitch to shut up." After that his eyes sorta closed, and he breathed deep like a snore; and then, he was dead. I would have forgot what he said, but later on, before the funeral, Mother told me to be sure not repeat it. "People just wouldn't understand," she said; and that had made me remember--"Tell the old bitch to shut up." When Grandma died she had said, "Goodbye my children. I see heavenly paths and heavenly fields." At least, that was what Grandpa always said. After he told that story, he always wiped his eyes and cleared his throat and wouldn't even talk to Mrs. Sisk to tell her what he wanted for dinner when she came to ask.

When he got mad, he took it out on Mrs. Sisk. She was the housekeeper, the only one we could get to stay at Grandpa's; and we had to have someone there because he wouldn't come stay in town. He cursed her and told us she was just like a nigger, only she talked back; but every time she'd pack up and leave, he'd complain and say, "I'm just

a lone and forsaken old man," until we went and begged her to come back. She'd act for a while like she wasn't coming, but I knew she would. When she wasn't at Grandpa's, she had to stay with her daughter-in-law, and her daughter-in-law couldn't stand to have Mrs. Sisk just sitting around. There wasn't much work to do, but just enough to make her unhappy. Mother said Mrs. Sisk was the laziest white woman she had ever seen.

The day after Grandpa died old Mr. Pinckney Freeman came up to the house to pay his respects. Uncle Jim Sullivan helped him to walk over. Mr. Pinckney used to come a lot, but he didn't get around so well anymore. Saturdays had always been the day he came. In the old days, he and Grandpa had ridden over to Buckner's Crossroads Saturday mornings to buy the staples. When I stayed out at Grandpa's, they'd wake me up in the morning arguing under the window, and I'd know it was Saturday and they were going to town. They were always arguing, and most of the time it was about which one of them was the healthiest. Grandpa out in the yard would say, "I'll crank the Ford this time, Pinckney. Jim told me that you've been having neuritis in that arm again."

"That Jim Sullivan beats all for lying. I ain't had that pain in two years come this fall." Mr. Pinckney would grab at the crank and give it vicious turns until the motor sputtered and caught, and then they would bump along off to town.

In the afternoons they would sit on the porch discussing each other's health and rocking fit to kill. The madder they got, the harder they rocked. I remember one afternoon about two summers ago. I was sitting on the front steps playing jackstones and listening to

the old men's voices when they talked and hearing, in the pauses, the hum of the dirt daubers gathered around the nest under the porch roof.

"Yes, Cyrus, you used to be the finest looking man in this county when you was young." Mr. Pinckney chuckled like he had a joke of his own. "I used to say to Mamie that I bet she wouldn't have had me if she had seen Cyrus Morgan first." Grandpa was beaming at what Mr. Pinckney was saying, rocking slow. "She used to tell me I'd better watch her yet a while, that Cyrus Morgan was still a good looker, only a little grey around the temples." Grandpa reached up with his two hands and smoothed his thick hair back self-consciously like he was putting on bay rum.

"Mamie died, let's see, near fifteen years ago." Mr. Pinckney stopped speaking and took a tobacco pouch from his hip pocket. He called me over to roll one for him. I liked to shake the tobacco out and roll it just right, and then lick the thin paper to stick it. "Yes sir, Cyrus," Mr. Pinckney went on like he was pleased with what he was aiming to say next. "But you've aged considerable since then." I stopped rolling the cigarette and held still, looking at Grandpa.

For a minute there I thought he was going to explode. He got to rocking faster and faster, but I saw he wasn't going to say anything back at Mr. Pinckney. He was just going to disappoint him. Just as casual, like he wasn't even waiting for, not even expecting an answer, Mr. Pinckney took the cigarette from my hand, lighted it, and started puffing. He didn't understand why Grandpa didn't answer, though, and he squirmed around and started rocking fast too. I went back to playing jackstones; and the dirt daubers buzzed in the roof, and the chairs rocked, squeak, squack, squeak, squack. Mother came

out on the porch with some garden peas to shell and sat down beside me on the steps. She looked at Grandpa, and he was rubbing his hands together like he always did when he was mad or when his heart was giving him a twinge or two.

"How are you feeling, Papa?" she asked, cautiously because she knew he didn't like the question. I was the only one who could ask him and get a decent answer. He'd always tell me, when I asked him, "Feeling mighty curious, son," and we'd both laugh because that was one of the jokes between us. Now when Mother asked, he looked like he wasn't going to answer for a minute. Then he said, very slow and deliberate, "I feel just as fine as a jay bird in poke berry time," emphasizing each word like he was giving a speech in church. That kinda left Mother without much to say. He kept on rocking, and I could tell he was mad. The faster Mr. Pinckney would rock, the faster Grandpa would rock till even Mother noticed. It seemed to be a contest, and we listened to see who would win. Mother kept her eyes down on the peas she was shelling, and the daubers hummed, and the chairs went squeak, squack; squeack, squack; squeak-squack; squeak-squack; faster and faster. I missed my jackstone ball and looked up just in time to see Grandpa's chair right at the edge of the porch give a tilt, balance in the air for a minute so that I saw the surprised look in his eyes, then give a screeching noise and go off the edge. Mother and I knew better than to laugh. Even Mr. Pinckney knew better than to laugh this time. It was as quiet as church on that porch till Grandpa's head came up over the edge. "That old witch," he said, "That old witch," and then we could all laugh because for some reason, nobody but Grandpa knew exactly why,

Mrs. Sisk was the cause of it all. Grandma, if she had been alive, would have hollered and laughed at Grandpa, and she wouldn't have taken the blame for it at all. "Why, Cyrus, you old fool," she would have said, and he would have took it. He might even have liked it, coming from Grandma.

The day Mr. Pinckney Freeman and Grandpa had the race is a day to remember, and folks still talk about it around here. It was a hot, midsummer day--on Friday. I remember it was Friday because we were surprised that Mr. Pinckney came that day. Grandpa had stayed in bed all morning; and when I asked him how he felt, he had said, "Mighty curious, son," and hadn't smiled a bit. He did get out of bed long enough to dress, though. For ten years he had been expecting Mr. Pinckney to trick him and come some time when he still had on his nightshirt and was in bed like an invalid. That would have killed Grandpa. But Mr. Pinckney had got right dependable about coming on Saturdays. That day, though, suddenly, without any warning, he popped around the side of the house, leaning on old Uncle Jim Sullivan. He just couldn't have come up by the road. I would have seen him.

"Hel--LO, MR. PINCK--ney," I called out real loud so as to warn Grandpa, and when Mr. Pinckney tried to push on through the door, I asked him would he have a chair. "Mrs. Sisk is cleaning up the front room," I said, "so we'd better not go in there." He took the chair, but now and then he turned and squinted over his shoulder into the darkness of the front room.

"Where's your Grandpa, son?" he asked.

"Oh--uh. He's out slopping the hogs," I said.

"Well, well," he murmured.

Just then Grandpa came walking up round the house, and for the life of me, I couldn't figure how he could have got up in that time, put on his galusses, brushed his hair, and got outside.

"Good morning to you, Pinckney," he said as hearty as he could.

"G'morning," Mr. Pinckney said shortly. He thought he was being tricked, I believe, but he didn't know how. "What'cha been doing, Cyrus?" he asked suspiciously.

"Been out walking." Grandpa breathed the air deeply. "Nothing like a good walk early in the morning."

"Boy, here, said you had been slopping the hogs."

"Ha, ha." Grandpa gave a false laugh. "I finished that some time ago."

"Oh," said Mr. Pinckney kinda defeated-like.

"Funny to see you out so soon, Pinckney," Grandpa said. "Morning air ain't good for neuritis."

"I always took a morning walk--always." Mr. Pinckney was speaking very correct like he does when he's mad. "I just thought that I would drop by and see if you was up."

"Where do you walk mornings?" Grandpa asked.

"Uh--down toward Maynard Creek."

"Now, ain't that funny. I do too, and I ain't never seen you down that way." I gasped at this. Grandpa never had taken a walk that I could remember. He said he didn't like to waste his energy that way. "Reckon we just miss each other," he went on.

"I guess we do. I guess that I just get out earlier," Mr. Pinckney said primly.

"No. Huh-uh." Grandpa shook his head. "I set out 'bout six."

"Well, now, that explains it, Cyrus," Mr. Pinckney came back. "I can't sleep in the mornings. I get up so early I have to light the lamp."

"Oh, I get up early, too." Grandpa smiled triumphantly. "But I usually feed up before light."

Mr. Pinckney didn't see no future in going on with this, so he said, "Ain't those walks bad on your heart? You ought to watch that heart."

"Dr. Mac says she's fine. He said to me, 'Mr. Morgan,' he says, 'I've got to hand it to you. You have the best constitution for a man of your years that I've ever seen.' How about that? Why walking ain't nothing. I reckon I could run a mile."

"I run some myself," Mr. Pinckney said, and I knew he was lying now. "Helps my legs keep limber."

"Now, I wouldn't a thought you could run, Pinckney," Grandpa said doubtfully.

"Oh, yes. I do it quite of-ten." (Mr. Pinckney said both syllables.) "I keep in shape that way. Bet you ten dollars I could beat you in a race, Cyrus."

"Taken," Grandpa said right off.

They got Uncle Jim Sullivan to draw them a startin' and a finish line, and they listened to him say, "Onyuhma'k. . . Gitset. . . Go," several times over to make sure he did it right. Jim didn't want no part in it, but they told him to keep outer their business and just do what they told him.

I held the stakes--ten dollars. Uncle Jim held Mr. Pinckney up

because he couldn't stand well by himself. Grandpa rubbed his shoes in the ground and crouched down like he was getting ready to make a mighty start. He could only get down a little ways because he was so stiff.

Uncle Jim said, "Onyuhma'k. . . Gitset. . . Go," and Grandpa started out pretty well, but he slowed down soon and Uncle Jim, toting Mr. Pinckney Freeman, caught up. As they passed, Uncle Jim kinda helped Grandpa a bit too, and it was sure funny to see. A race with Grandpa and Mr. Pinckney Freeman so old they couldn't hardly stand up, and Uncle Jim trying to run, holding them both up. Uncle Jim broke away from Grandpa after a minute, but you can't blame him. After all, Mr. Pinckney is the one who pays his wages. Well, Mr. Pinckney won the ten dollars, but Grandpa maintained it wasn't fair since Jim held Mr. Pinckney up. "Take the stakes back if you like. I'll have the satisfaction of knowing I won fair and square," Mr. Pinckney answered him self-righteously.

Grandpa said, "No, you go on and keep them, Pinckney, and don't you feel bad about it. After all, you've got the most doctor's bills to pay." That was the way it always was. Mr. Pinckney beat the races and contests, but Grandpa bested him with words.

The rest of the morning they sat on the porch telling each other how well they felt. "Yes sir, a little runnin' now and then is good for a man. Loosens the joints."

"That it is, Pinckney. That it is."

It was some time after this that they put up the "death stakes." Although Grandpa pretended not to mind, the thought that Mr. Pinckney

won the race ate at his heart. Every now and then you could hear him mutter to himself, "It won't fair and square. Honest folks don't race like that." He wanted to get back at Mr. Pinckney, and he thought of the "death stakes" as the way. The plan was that each would put ten dollars in a sealed envelope in his pocket and address it to the other and that the first one died lost his ten dollars. Mrs. Sisk heard them talking about it, and she said it was the devil in them coming out to carry on like that about death. Grandpa just told her she was a superstitious old fool.

After that I would see Grandpa take the envelope out of his pocket just any old time and look at it. It had in great, fancy handwriting:

*For Pinckney Freeman, Esquire
to be delivered
when T. Cyrus Morgan, pass on.*

Grandpa loved a bet, and he loved this one best of all. I had forgotten all about it till the day when Mr. Pinckney came up the house.

After he had been into the back parlor to see the body, he came out on the porch and sat down in his usual rocker, not speaking to anyone. I don't think he knew what to say to us now that Grandpa wasn't around. Once he looked at me, and I felt like I shouldn't have been there for some reason. I wanted to get up and leave, but he kept looking at me, and I couldn't move. Finally he looked away, and then I thought that he really hadn't seen me at all. He sat there about a half hour, not talking to anyone. Then he motioned to Uncle Jim to help him get up. Mother didn't see that he was leaving till he was down the path a ways.

"Oh, Mr. Freeman," she hollered with her hands cupped at her mouth because he was a little deaf, "Mr. Freeman. She went down the path after him. He walked back to meet her, and I heard her tell him, "This envelope, Mr. Freeman. It was found in my father's pocket. It's addressed to you." Mother acted like it was only a letter, but we all knew what it was. The stakes. Mr. Pinckney took the letter and smiled for the first time since he had been there. "Thank you, ma'm," he said and tipped his hat like Grandpa used to do.

Mr. Pinckney Freeman made big plans about what he was aiming to do with that ten dollars, and he talked it all over the county. He kept it on his bureau, and they say he looked at it every morning when he got up and every night before he went to bed. But, somehow, he couldn't seem to decide how to spend it. Once, he took it out to put in the basket at revival, but Uncle Jim told him it was the same as "blood money" and no good would come of it. Mr. Pinckney said he didn't hold with such, only he wouldn't put it in church as he had decided to save it for something else he had in mind. They say Mr. Pinckney Freeman never spent that money. I saw the envelope on his bureau many a time, tucked under a scarf Miss Mamie had crocheted. It was all thick with dust from being there so long, but Grandpa's great, fancy handwriting showed through just as plain as anything.

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Approved by

Jane Summerell

Director

Examining Committee

Jane Summerell, Chairman
Alfonso Miller